

A Brief Sojourn among the Children of the Breath

By Peter Ellis

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On a winter's evening the hot tub feels delicious. A dozen of us, naked or in swimsuits, wallow in the soft blue water. The air in the candle-lit tubroom is opaque with steam and incense. It is the second day of the week long course in Rebirthing, and the course leader (who trained with Leonard Orr) guides us into the much-heralded 'hot tub rebirthing' session. Each person in turn is invited to lie back in the water, relax, and breathe, deeply and continuously, connecting the inhale to the exhale.

At last it is my turn. My rebirther is blonde and beautiful, one of the senior assistants. She holds my head, and I surrender to the messages of love and support and safety she breathes in my ear. Other assistants surround and support my body. I close my eyes and breathe, determined to let go and get the most from this experience. I did one breathing session before five years ago with my therapist, who trained with Frank Lake in the 'abreaction' technique. That was a good experience during which I recovered birth memories and feelings I was later able to validate. But I want to know more; I want to know it all.

Twenty minutes later I am in considerable pain. My hands feel paralysed, the joints locked and contorted. There is discomfort and numbness elsewhere too, in my lips, my feet; and tightness round my stomach. This, I discover later, is the condition called 'tetany'. Most people get it, in varying degrees, through the breathing. I had it before, but not half as badly as this. My rebirthers tell me to keep breathing, to breathe through it, and to 'let it go'. I am also losing touch with my bodily feelings. I have done a lot of 'cathartic' bodywork in recent years; through it I have learned to trust my body sense, my gut feelings. I thought this 'connected breathing' would enhance my bodily connections as it took me back in time, but it seems to be doing the opposite. Maybe I am doing it wrong. I start pausing after each exhale in order to 'listen' to my body. As I start to regain some connection, it shudders and jerks a little. My rebirther notices and tells me to stop pausing, to reconnect the exhale to the next inhale; to breathe deeper and higher into my chest.

The tetany eases as I breathe less. Now I have a conflict. I want to stay with the rebirthing process and breathe beyond the tetany, but my body urges me otherwise. I decide to stay with my body, feeling a bit angry at being torn like this. I discharge some of the anger through small convulsions of the pelvis; this draws the attention of the leader, who comes over and joins my rebirther in encouraging me to do the 'right thing' and breathe more. This makes

me suddenly a lot angrier! 'Whose birth is this anyway?' I yell out to all and sundry. The leader yells back at me: 'Peter, this is not a psychodrama, it's a rebirthing!' I carry on doing it my way, while the rebirthers mutter. I still have some tetany pain, plus a stomach ache which I recognise as repressed anger. Some time later, I hear the leader's voice again: 'You'd better get him out; it doesn't work that way.'

They lift me gently out of the tub and onto a lilo; cover me in towels. My rebirther stays with me, still friendly but with no useful suggestions on how I am to deal with my stomach ache. After a while I tell her I need to do my own work to get rid of it. I turn over into a kneeling position and do some cathartic bodywork. Within about twenty minutes my body feels OK again and the tetany has gone.

In the sharing that follows the session, people report their experiences. The majority have done it before; people come back time after time to rebirth and many are doing the three-year professional training. Out of us novices, several found the session useful. Joe, for instance, senses relief from his chronic indigestion. His 'breathe' brought up pains and feelings which he thinks were memories of infantile feeding. For Joe, like me, the important bit came after he was out of the tub, working on his own. This reinforces my impression that his relief has come from a straightforward piece of regression work.

Although for most it was a positive experience, no-one in my group of eight reports reaching the advertised state of ecstasy. Many got tetany, but regard it as part of the deal. Most accept the leader's explanation that this is a recovery of the pain you felt from the harshness and separation experienced at birth. As such it is the body's resistance to love. The aim of rebirthing is to let go of it through the breathing and 'receive the love that was always yours'. I speak of the conflict I felt between the demands of the breathing and what my body wanted, but no one shares my sense that the breath takes you away from your body. I am told I am resisting; I must let go more. 'You're the one in charge; not your body. Feelings don't run your life; they're not who you are.'

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In the evenings that follow we learn more of the rebirthing philosophy. Feeling is defined as body sensation plus thought added on. Emotions are not recognised as vital; yes we may feel grief and anger and it's OK to express them, but this is negative stuff arising from the false thoughts and beliefs acquired through birth experience. Leonard Orr called it 'emotional garbage'. Much of the experiential work on the course is about detaching 'wrong' thoughts from painful body sensations, and re-attaching new 'creative' ones. This boils down to rewriting history. We are invited to believe that everything that happened to us was 'perfect' for us. We are encouraged to build a 'creator consciousness', in which child abuse is seen as

'two people in service to one another'. There is much emphasis on forgiveness, and one woman is moved to declare her gratitude to her mother for abandoning her at an early age. The opposite of creator consciousness is 'victim consciousness', which is essentially a state of anger about the past. The message is that as long as you feel angry you are stuck, a victim of your own false thoughts. But with the breathing you can let go of it; redefine your experience and so nullify the anger.

Hot air

Among the participants I am aware of much repressed anger and a lot of heavy breathing. One man, Bernard, shares that he now rebirths spontaneously, whenever a situation sets his 'stuff' rising up inside him; he is doing it more and more frequently. I am left wondering if Bernard will soon be in one continuous rebirth; unless he spontaneously combusts, which he looks like he might. Later he declares, to great applause, that he has decided to enter the professional training. He'll need it too, if he is to continue holding down all that anger.

It gradually dawns on me that the repression of anger is what the breathing technique is about. It acts in two ways. Firstly it puts the mind in a highly suggestible state in which the 'creative' thoughts that remove any justification for anger can take hold. Secondly, if continued beyond a certain point, it serves to detach mind from body. At one stage we all lie down for a 'group breathe', during which a tape is played, which I dub the 'breath commercial'. To a bizarre background of heavy breathing and heavenly music, seductive voices sell you the product: 'The breath is the interface between spirit and form'; 'The seed implanted in the mind is nourished by the breath, then takes root in the heart'. By this time I have decided that the gospel of the breath is not for me, and haunted by some primitive fear of an alien virus taking root in my heart, I breathe with caution.

I note other evidence of repressed anger, giggling when anger is mentioned, hawking and spitting and throatiness. One angry-looking girl smilingly explains an injured hand; she smashed it into a hard object, twice. Someone else smashed his car coming in this morning. Many people, in one way or another, express veiled hostility to what we are doing. Bryan, creatively re-inventing his parents' neglect as the best experience he ever had, admits to feeling pissed off inside. Greta, redefining an unpleasant Caesarian birth as 'perfect for her', struggles with a vague sense that she is lying to herself. Others feel they just don't want to be here at all, but I seem to be the only one who does not interpret all this feeling as resistance, to be let go of to make room for the love that comes through the breath.

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Our course is plagued by fire. Early on, there is drama when the young teenage daughter of

a senior assistant sets fire to her bedroom, causing considerable damage to the family home but fortunately no injury. A few mornings later, the conference room we work in is found filled with smoke. Someone had left their notebook on a radiator; when picked up it spontaneously bursts into flame. I am tempted to interpret these incidents as manifestations of nature's displeasure at a vital element of life being suppressed. Earth, air, fire, water. We hear plenty about the first three, symbolising body sensation, thought, energy. But without water, symbol of the emotion which the breath philosophy denigrates, the fruits of the earth dry up and are prey to destruction by fire.

Something puzzles me. The course advocates natural childbirth and espouses the Michel Odent philosophy of empowering women to get off their backs and give birth in the way that feels right to them. The course leader herself has pioneered water birth. Why in that case, I ask her, are we told to lie on our backs for rebirthing, and to breathe in a prescribed way? She explains that rebirthing is not at all the same process as real birth; it aims not to foster bodily activity but to achieve the bodily stillness which allows God's love to enter. This philosophy has yogic and other oriental origins.

When it comes to our final 'breathe' (not in water this time) I resolve to do it my way. Inspired by the pictures of natural birth we were shown, I get off my back, turn over and squat, creating a womb-like space under a protective blanket. Then, breathing at a rate that feels right, I begin to sense the power of the real birth process. Progressively I feel the ecstasy of being fully alive in my body, and deep in my being I know that the blend of feeling I am delivering through it — the mingling of pleasure, grief, compassion, anger, self-assertion — are all the same stuff: the stuff of life. Now that's real rebirthing.

